

Faith and Order

Paper no. 46

Unity:

a wide door

and many

adversaries

by

PATRICK C. RODGER

# COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

World

Council

of Churches

Geneva 1966



COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

UNITY: A WIDE DOOR  
AND MANY ADVERSARIES

by

PATRICK C. RODGER

Paper No. 46

World Council of Churches  
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER  
Geneva, 1966

Reprinted from *The Ecumenical Review* Vol. XVIII - No. 2 - April 1966

© 1966 Copyright by the World Council of Churches, Geneva.  
Printed in Switzerland by Imprimerie La Concorde.

“A wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.” In this well-known verse from the First Epistle to the Corinthians (16. 9), St. Paul described his situation at Ephesus. It came to me as a suitable text under which to present to the Central Committee some of the “general developments” and “specific issues” of Christian unity in the world today.

Certainly we cannot complain of lack of opportunities for effective work. The interest in unity, within our churches and even outside them, has probably never been so widespread as it is today. To such an extent is this true that intelligent people become wary of unity as a slogan or tired of it as a catch-phrase. They press upon us in the World Council the duty of deeper reflection, closer analysis, more realistic grappling with the obstacles in the path of unity. To that theme I shall return later, but first it is necessary to say something both of the opportunities and of the adversaries in our path.

## I

“A wide door... has opened”: wide, first of all, in the sense of the number of churches and confessions that are involved in the active pursuit of greater unity. Let us consider the Orthodox Churches first. The decisions of the Third Pan-Orthodox Conference, held at Rhodes, in November 1964 were that fresh theological conversations should be initiated with the Old Catholic Churches and with the Anglican Communion; and that preparations should be made by the autocephalous churches, as each thought best, for the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, which would follow the Second Vatican Council. In accordance with these decisions, the pan-Orthodox commissions have been set up, with parallel action by the Old Catholics and the Anglicans, and the agenda is at present being established in both cases. We have already heard from Metropolitan Meliton of the mutual annulment of the anathemas of 1054 by Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I together with his Holy Synod; this took place at a moving

ceremony just before the close of the Second Vatican Council. Although this was a symbolic action, not legally binding for any other Orthodox Church, yet its effect upon the new climate for dialogue must surely be great. It suggests to other churches besides the two concerned a mode of approach towards the failure of our past histories that could bear much fruit for the Ecumenical Movement.

There has also been a drawing together of five Oriental Orthodox, or pre-Chalcedonian, Churches in a desire for common study and action in ecumenical matters ; their Standing Committee, which met in Cairo last month, pursued the carrying out of the policy framed in Addis Ababa last year. On the side of the "Chalcedonian" Orthodox, an overture was made by the Ecumenical Patriarch last July, in which he proposed what may be called a programme of *rapprochement*, with the formation of theological commissions on both sides as the first step.

In the work of Faith and Order it has frequently been a matter of complaint that Orthodox representation in our study commissions was so scanty that Christians of other traditions were apt to comfort themselves with the false impression that "the Orthodox point of view" was being truly presented. For this reason we have initiated within the last two years some study groups in which half the membership, or slightly more, is composed of Orthodox theologians. One group of this kind has been devoting itself to the study of the Councils of the Early Church and their bearing on the Ecumenical Movement of today — a study asked for at New Delhi — and another group to St. Basil's treatise on the Holy Spirit. The progress and productivity of these groups entitles us to think that the new experiment in method has been worthwhile.

When we turn to the Anglican and Protestant churches, it is hard to know where to begin. Even without mentioning actual negotiations for union (which will come up later), time would fail me to retail the various approaches and ventures in dialogue that are being made in so many parts of the world. Lutheran - Reformed conversations continue to be held each year in Europe and North America. These are strictly concerned with theological issues underlying divisions, but they begin to put some radical questions to the continued separation between churches of the Reformation. Anglicans for their part, are overwhelmed with conversations : with Methodists, with Presbyterians, with Orthodox,

with Dutch Reformed, with German Lutherans, with Roman Catholics, and, in the intervals occasionally among themselves ! It is an authentic picture of the vocation which the Anglican Communion has long claimed for itself. Nevertheless, this complexity evidently poses some problems which we need to study carefully in the WCC. When our hard-pressed theologians become involved both in Faith and Order studies and in various inter-church conversations, it is easy for unnecessary overlapping to take place and for the same work to be repeated *de novo*, without sufficient account being taken of previous findings in ecumenical discussion.

It is appropriate to mention next the consultation of representatives of World Confessional bodies which has taken place annually in Geneva since 1962. This meeting, originally convened in order to take counsel about observers for the Second Vatican Council, has touched many aspects of the Ecumenical Movement. But at its 1965 meeting it came more explicitly than ever before to raise questions that concern Faith and Order. Among the "questions of principle" which this meeting resolved to put to their various organizations, was the following : "What does confessionalism mean in the life of the churches, especially the older churches, which maintain a confessional stand or insist on certain forms of church structure in relation to others, but have within themselves varied theological and ecclesiological positions ?" This is of course a question of more than theoretical concern to theologians who have been involved in Faith and Order work across denominational frontiers, but our problem in the past has been how to communicate their particular experience to the churches as a whole. We therefore welcome warmly the self-examination which the World Confessional bodies have proposed in their "questions of principle" and "questions of function," and we shall be glad if Faith and Order can be of service to their future discussions.

This part of my survey should conclude with at least a few words about the Roman Catholic Church, since there, if anywhere, new doors have opened during the past year. The official actions taken since the promulgation of *De Oecumenismo* have already been reported to the Committee. It is enough to add that in many regions and countries Roman Catholics have shown an extraordinary eagerness to acquire ecumenical information and to enter into theological conversations.

The Ecumenical Press Service records many "first occasions" of this kind, and only a fraction of those actually taking place are recorded. In at least three Faith and Order Studies — on the Nature of Unity, on the Eucharist and on Spirit, Order and Organization — we are benefiting from the help of Roman Catholic consultants. A meeting at Strasbourg last August, to which an observer from the WCC was invited, marked the beginning of theological talks, to be continued this year, between representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and those of the Roman Catholic Church. Finally, the amount of intellectual as well as of spiritual activity connected with the Week of Prayer for Unity has shown us recently that the new horizons of unity are exciting for many of the rank-and-file Roman Catholic clergy and laity. Perhaps for that reason these same horizons have become more exciting to those of us who have lived with them for a longer time.

So much for the scope of discussions concerning unity, considered confessionally. It is no less wide if we consider it geographically. The effort to make church people think seriously about division and unity is steadily pursued in many regions and countries, often under the auspices of Councils. The East Asia Christian Conference Faith and Order meeting on "Confessing the Faith in Asia Today" is now scheduled to be held at Hong Kong from 26 October until 3 November 1966. Preparations have been conducted through correspondents in various nations of East Asia, and the West has been making some contributions through papers on the meaning of baptism and confession of faith. Area Conferences on Faith and Order multiply in many parts of the USA, showing local responses to the vigorous stimulus given by the Faith and Order office of the National Council of Churches. On my visit to South America last August and September I found small groups of enthusiasts anxious to see that biblical and theological study of unity should be promoted among the Evangelical churches and preparation made for the dialogue with Roman Catholics which begins to be demanded in that continent.

As for the operations conducted from Geneva, in several of the studies initiated at Aarhus in 1964 — on the Ministry, on the Eucharist, on biblical Hermeneutics — it was resolved to adopt a method of working largely through regional study groups. It seemed that there was no



other way to do justice to the expansion of Faith and Order studies, while keeping within the limited possibilities of our budget and time for staff travel. It is too early to say what harvest we shall reap from this method by the time of the Faith and Order Commission meeting in 1967 — probably some of the fields will not be ripe enough for harvesting by then. At any rate we are grateful to those who are willing to give time and trouble to the organization of such regional groups, to keep in touch with us concerning their progress, and (not least) to produce their reports in due course. By their means we may avoid the common complaint that Faith and Order studies are not sufficiently “earthed” in the life of the churches, and the reports may serve to show how many common elements there are in the ecumenical problems of diverse continents.

As for Church Union negotiations, the usual biennial survey is even now being prepared and is due to appear in the *Ecumenical Review* for July, 1966. I do no more, therefore, than select a few features from a great amount of material; and I take this opportunity of thanking those correspondents from Church Union Committees, who have diligently provided information for the Faith and Order Secretariat and have consulted us from time to time about particular problems. There are disappointments as well as joys: we were all distressed by the necessity for last-minute postponement of the Inauguration of the United Church of Nigeria last December, and we pray that it may not be too long before the obstacles there have been surmounted. In East Africa likewise, progress has not been smooth; at the Dodoma meeting a year ago the Lutheran and Moravian representatives felt that they could not proceed to negotiate union on the basis of the present Scheme, and since then it has been apparent that the Anglican Province of East Africa has difficulties in continuing with a plan which would create different church situations in Kenya and Tanzania respectively. We should not, however, regard the doors as closed in East Africa any more than in Nigeria.

In other parts of the world, progress has sometimes shown a surprising rapidity. The United Church of Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada, whose mood seven or eight years ago was not hopeful, have now published the Principles of Union between the two churches, their

committees affirming that they have reached unanimous agreement on "the essential elements in the faith and order of the Church." Next door in the USA, the Consultation on Church Union between six denominations has advanced to the stage of appointing a group of six representatives to draw up a scheme of union. In the United Kingdom, Anglicans and Methodists both received in their assemblies last year an encouraging vote to proceed with their negotiations for union, although some clarifications of the existing plan were required first. Presbyterians and Congregationalists have published a joint "Statement of Convictions" which was sent out by their Assemblies last year for discussion and comment by the Churches; after revision it may be used as a statement of principles for a basis of union and constitution. The plans for North India and Ceylon, which had both seemed somewhat becalmed in recent years, received a renewal of hope and vigour. The Bishop of Colombo has encouraged us to think that a United Church of Ceylon might be ready for inauguration before the end of the 1960s; while the fourth edition of the North India scheme has now received favourable votes from the United Church of North India, from Anglicans and from Methodists of British background.

One of the complaints frequently urged against Church Union negotiations is that they proceed at too leisurely a pace, within committees that meet usually once a year, and that in the intervals there is too little communication with their constituencies in the churches. It is therefore interesting to hear of the method being employed in New Zealand, where five churches — Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational, and Disciples — are now in conversation. Instead of waiting for a final report, the Joint Commission has already published its first report. This is distributed, along with a study booklet, to all the Churches. The Commission then requested that the Churches decide whether each section of the report is "a sufficient guide to the Commission in the preparation of a basis of union." By this means all levels of the Churches can be engaged in preparation for union from the outset. This approach is supplemented by proposals for joint action in church work and co-operation in Christian education and joint theological education. Finally, the Commission has proposed to the Churches an "act of commitment" which they would undertake if the first report is approved.

This is not preliminary approval of union before conditions are agreed upon, but a covenant to seek such conditions, in the faith that they can be found.

## II

So far we have spoken of opportunity, development, progress. It is striking how many of the movements to which I have referred are only in their initial stages; this suggests that ecumenism has not yet become mere material for a history entitled "Sixty Glorious Years"! But now we must consider some less palatable facts. One to which our document on "The Ecumenical Way" referred is that since 1947 only three acts of Church union have crossed the lines of church polity; the most recent of these unions was that forming the Church of Jamaica and Grand Cayman (a Presbyterian - Congregational union whose happy inauguration we salute). This lack of achievement may be no more than symbolic, but we are all aware that the path to a true and worthwhile union is not an easy one. There is the familiar inertia of institutions; there is sometimes surprising apathy in local congregations (it is a romantic error in high places to suppose that all parishes are impatient for unity); there is the laziness, or ecclesiastical nihilism, which refuses to treat visible union with much seriousness; there is, finally, a persistent voicing of the conviction that somehow — it is often not clear *how* — "organic union" implies indifference to fundamentals of faith and standards of holiness. Some of these factors we are attempting to study and elucidate through the current Faith and Order work on "Spirit, Order and Organization," in which theologians and sociologists look at the same phenomena of church life, and discipline one another mutually by their analyses of what they see.

We all know that to speak of "many adversaries" is a dangerous course. It is so easy for us to identify those adversaries with those who do not agree with us in theology or in strategy; a particular church, a splinter group, a journal, a theologian, then is cast for the role of villain — whereas it may be that our own impatience reveals a desire for something less than a full and sensitive ecumenism. Since we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, it behoves

us to make a deeper analysis of where the adversaries in the path to unity really lie. I venture to suggest three of them :

(a) Ignorance of what the Ecumenical Movement has already shown us. Most of us are uneasily aware that there is apt to be a certain wastefulness in our efforts, arising from the failure of busy people, overloaded with paper, to study and lay to heart the work previously done, e.g. by the Faith and Order movement. True, we have received a reasonable degree of response to the actual work of the Montreal Conference. Yet there are a good many occasions in the life of our churches when it looks as though the studies so laboriously carried out from Lund to Montreal had been recorded in vain. Are causing we ourselves unnecessary trouble, and discouragement to theologians who give their time and energy to such studies, because our churches are not being sufficiently informed of agreement already expressed — and, still more, not sufficiently prompted to respond to these agreements by some action on their own part ?

The failure to communicate ought not, as it often is, to be laid at the door of a single culprit. This is an easy game, and I am sure that until the Last Trump there will be those in the parishes who denounce their denominational leaders for withholding valuable ecumenical information, while others denounce the authors of those documents they *do* receive as being “rarefied ecumenists,” ignorant of the joys and sorrows of frontline Christianity. As they say, you can’t win : and maybe that does not matter much. But meanwhile we can at least try to locate the best channels for communication. To give a few examples : after the First British Faith and Order Conference at Nottingham a concise and wellwritten report, at modest price, was produced within a month or two of the Conference, under the title *Unity Begins at Home*. This was a good instance of the truth that our ecumenism, like our liturgy, should be in the vernacular. From Geneva we have sent copies of the World Council Study on *The Ministry of Deacons* direct to Secretaries of Church Union Committees, and interim reports on the study of *Religious Education Material in the light of the Ecumenical Movement* to some of those who make decisions in this field within the churches. In such ways we try to speed up communication and to reach more quickly the point at which reflection can be translated into policy.

On another level — that of long-term scholarship — it is a fact that at present the great majority of students who apply to us for “Faith and Order subjects” for doctoral dissertations are Roman Catholics. In one way, this is very gratifying ; in another, it implies some questions to our own member churches.

(b) Secondly I would mention a common, but surely false, contrast between a care for unity and a care for the needs and questionings of mankind as a whole. There is a great vogue among us today for the word “introspection,” and this word is sometimes used in charges against Faith and Order work, as if it were a selfish pursuit of ecclesiastics, unimportant to the world at large and actually harmful when it occupies the time of our theologians in secondary questions. It is right that we should pay proper attention to this kind of criticism, if only because it is quite widespread ; and this is one strong motive for the present Faith and Order “frontier” study on *Creation, New Creation and the Unity of the Church* — a study which the Montreal Conference pressed strongly upon us. But surely the words “and the unity of the Church” are not there for decoration only. If the unity of the Church has nothing to do with the purpose of God for creation and the service of Christians to humanity, then some of us have not read our New Testament aright. We are passing through a period of ecclesiological kenosis in the theologies most fashionable at present, and this may be a salutary douche of cold water for our pretensions. But to undervalue the vocation of the Church in the service of the Kingdom is surely to miss the message of Holy Scripture itself.

(c) Third, and deepest of all, is a spiritual malaise which we all love to rationalize. The New Delhi statement on unity was followed by these two sentences :

‘The achievement of unity will involve nothing less than a death and rebirth of many forms of church life as we have known them. We believe that nothing less costly can finally suffice.’

I am not sure what weight we should give to that little word “finally,” but it is certain that the way of Cross and Resurrection, the way of Christ himself, is one which we see quite clearly and one from which our human weakness shrinks again and again. Frantic appeals are still heard to some inviolable national or confessional tradition ; wearisome

denunciations are directed against some imagined threat of "uniformity" ; and the unspoken prayer of many is "O Lord, make us one, but not yet." For this adversary there is surely no remedy even in the very best kind of theological argument. "The sort goes not out but by prayer and fasting."

### III

I have now, in a manner, presented thesis and antithesis, opportunities and adversaries ; but I am not a good enough Hegelian to produce for you the perfect synthesis through the work of Faith and Order ! Nevertheless, we must try to draw some conclusions for the period which lies between this meeting and the Fourth Assembly in 1968. It goes without saying that the task of seizing the opportunities and striving with the adversaries belongs to the World Council, its central Committee, and the people of its member churches, as a whole. The particular question here is : how can Faith and Order help ? What form of *theological* assistance is most required at this juncture of the pursuit of unity ? I think we do not need to take too seriously those who like to scoff at "theological niceties" — in my experience, institutional niceties are far more obstructive and far more frequently encountered than theological ones. Theological assistance is certainly needed, and it is the task of Faith and Order to see that (while we may never despise the voice of the solitary prophet) such assistance should be a co-operative enterprise, so far as possible. In practical terms, what should we look for as a contribution from the Faith and Order Commission meeting, due to be held in the summer of 1967, towards the Assembly the following year ?

One focus of our studies, as laid down at Aarhus in 1964, is the group drawn from our Working Committee, which has been charged with a study of unity itself — I am not sure whether to say "The Nature of Unity" or "The Unity we Seek," for as far as I know, the title has not yet been fixed, and those I have mentioned have appeared as too static or too well-worn. There is, however, greater clarity about the content of the study and its method. The most pressing problem is how to complete it in time for a good working document to go from Faith and Order Commission to Assembly. The intention is to produce some theses, with commentary where required, which would serve as a point

of departure for a Section of the Assembly and might indeed fulfil a role similar to that played by the St. Andrews Statement on Unity at New Delhi. Such theses should be supported and amplified in a collection of essays, to be published separately, after the manner of the preparatory volumes for Lund 1952.

So much for method. What of the purpose of the study? It may be asked whether New Delhi did not say all that we could say together about unity, at least for a decade or so. But this is by no means sure. The developments which I mentioned in the first part of my speech have all taken place since New Delhi (and Montreal) and provide us with a new living context for our reflections. Because in many places New Delhi has been taken seriously — and because the New Delhi statement contained many ambiguities and open questions, of which its authors were quite well aware — it seems our duty to press on: not simply to elaborate New Delhi, in the sense of providing a fuller commentary on a text to which we should then appear to accord almost biblical status but rather to *deepen* the enquiry by a more radical (and perhaps less eirenic) treatment of some issues which New Delhi only touched on or omitted altogether.

Let me give a few examples of the kind of issues I mean:

(a) In the popular use of the New Delhi Statement, emphasis has been laid above all on the phrase “all in each place,” sometimes to such an extent that the balancing words later on, which refer to “the whole Christian fellowship in all ages and in all places,” have been entirely overlooked. At any rate it seems clear that further attention must be given to the two poles of locality and universality in our thinking about unity. The developments with which I began this report — the reiteration of well-known convictions concerning unity by Orthodox and Roman Catholics respectively, and the present debate opened up by the representatives of “world confessional bodies” — mean that we need to make a more rigorous examination of the notion of catholicity than it was possible to do at New Delhi. For if catholicity be simply left in an uneasy contrast to local manifestations of the Church, we are laying up for ourselves a good deal of trouble in the future. This, then, is one aspect of the Faith and Order study at present in progress.

(b) Some critics of the New Delhi Statement found it altogether too "timeless" and missed in it an adequate recognition of the actual troubles and schisms which have marred the history of the Church, almost from her beginning. Indeed, we may go further back still — to the Bible itself — and point out that ecumenists have a way of using certain proof-texts or chapters (e.g. John 17, Ephesians 4), which do not directly confront the mystery of division and its causes. In its present study, our group has recognized the force of such criticisms as these. In its meetings, there has already been some discussion of continuity and discontinuity in the Church, first in terms of the Old and New Testaments — and here we hope for some enlightenment from the study on "Israel and the Church" jointly undertaken by Faith and Order and the Committee on the Church and the Jewish people — and then in terms of Christian history. What is the relation of discontinuity and schism in the Church to the effects of sin? There seems to be a sharp divergence here in the traditional thinking of Roman Catholics and Orthodox on the one hand and Anglicans and Protestants on the other; which may suggest that we are above all intent on justifying our own histories. At any rate, if we are right to think of the Ecumenical Movement as in some degree a movement of mutual repentance among separated communities, we surely need to seek greater clarity on the nature of the sins which have necessitated repentance, and the bearing of those sins on the history of our divisions. (For if *we* have grown accustomed to describing these divisions as "unhappy," some Christians prefer to regard them as necessary, and others again as positively glorious.)

(c) Another emphasis which was to be found in the New Delhi Statement, and also in much Roman Catholic thinking as formulated in Vatican II, was upon "the unity of all the baptized." This is an emphasis which has had some happy ecumenical consequences and it can claim the support of some convergence of views on the theology of Holy Baptism, as expressed (e.g.) in the pre-Montreal booklet *One Lord, One Baptism*. Yet at Montreal itself there were already spokesmen, especially Baptists, who warned us that we should not put more weight on this concept of unity than it was really able to bear. Since Montreal we have been reminded that all is not plain sailing, first by cases of "conditional baptism" of adults which have seemed to deny the unity



of Christian baptism; and secondly by the perplexities of churches becoming more and more unhappy about the practice of large-scale infant baptism in a secularized country. This is a place where pastoral, theological and ecumenical problems meet. It remains for our Faith and Order study to see whether it can make any advance upon New Delhi; it will be necessary in that case to show that the "unity of the baptized" rests upon a true incorporation in the one Christ and not simply upon the satisfactory performance of the same external acts by churches which still mean different things and maintain separate existences.

These are some of the main thrusts of our study so far, but I would emphasize that its form is still in the making. There are other elements in the discussion, such as the relation of "secular unities" to Church unity and the meaning of the New Testament teaching on the Anti-christ, which may come to the fore as the work progresses. We may sum up by saying that the task we attempt is one of analysis and, if God grant it, of *illumination*. There are many doubts and uncertainties in people's minds about whether unity among Christians is either possible or desirable, and we cannot go forward very far on the ecumenical way till we have tried, in the light of the Gospel, to meet these same uncertainties as they occur in our own minds.

It is a part of our job to uncover the truth of God's will for his Church, so that those who turn aside from that truth may be "without excuse." But we all know quite well that we cannot be saved by a pre-Christian type of teaching which claims that it is enough to see the truth in order to do it. We may not simply "study pneumatology," as we often propose at the present time; we must also obey the Holy Spirit himself, and in such obedience we shall learn of the doctrine, whether it be of God. This is why it was a happy day when Faith and Order became part of the whole many-sided enterprise of the World Council of Churches, linked through study and practical collaboration and personal friendship with other Departments, other interests, other constituencies in the one Ecumenical Movement. Faith and Order has no meaning except as a service to the life of the Church *militans in via*; but as long as the Church must struggle with the shameful weakness of her disunity, and sometimes her indifference to disunity, that service must continue to be faithfully rendered.





